

■ **life-writing**

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A

text by Capuchin friar Miquel d'Esplugues on the irreverent Cristòfor de Domènec (1879-1927)

A Philosopher's Leisure is the title of Cristòfor de Domènec's second book, published posthumously in 1928, and which was confiscated by police "on allegations of slandering Catholic religion and morality, shortly after its release. Domènec (Barcelona, 1878-1927) was an essayist and a self-taught philosopher, immersed in Barcelona's bohemian world during the first quarter of the twentieth century. He became popular for his irreverence and corrosive humor through articles he published, under the pseudonym Brand, in the journal *Social Justice*, in a section entitled "Diary of Heterodox Thinker", which also gave name to the collection of articles he published in his lifetime¹.

That collection had already suffered distribution problems. As Sallarès² —editor and friend of the author— explained to Domènec himself, "the Catholic bookstores, it goes without saying, have refused to sell it". However, it was in *Criterion*, an avowedly Christian magazine, in 1929, two years after Domènec died of tuberculosis, where the article *A Philosopher's Leisure* (also the title of Domènec's second book) was published in memoriam. We now present it for you here.

Criterion was the first Catalan journal of philosophy, and in entirely catalan. Remarkably, it was published three times a year without interruption for over more than a decade, from 1925 to 1936. Its founders' main goal was

1 For more information on Cristòfor de Domènec, see the chapter by P.Casanovas, "Política i Filosofia en Cristòfor de Domènec (1914-1927)" [Politics and Philosophy in Cristòfor de Domènec (1914-1927)], in P. Casanovas (ed.), *Miquel Carreras Costajussà i la filosofia catalana d'entreguerres (1918-1939)*, Barcelona, Institut d'Estudis Catalans-Societat Catalana de Filosofia, 2009.

2 Letter from Joan Sallarès to Cristòfor de Domènec, dated the 4th of June, 1926.

to promote neo-Thomism, along the lines of Cardinal Mercier and Pope Leo XIII. On the other hand, its collaborators presented themselves as continuers of a purely Christian and Thomist Catalan philosophical tradition –as outlined by Bishop Torras i Bages.

This meeting of irreverence with piety was possible thanks to Miquel d'Esplugues, the Capuchin friar and author of the article we offer here, who was the heart and soul of *Criterion*. His tolerant nature led the Thomist ranks to an openness toward “everyone, [...] whoever they are, wherever they're from”, according to rules “drenched in the deepest patriotism and a broad spirit of openness to everyone's work”. Under his direction, *Criterion* made good on Clascar's saying that “in philosophy, reason weighs more than authority”³ and established itself as a philosophical movement invoking all that could bring together and unite: “join forces, unify ideals, not bemoan sacrifices”⁴. Certainly, this conversion to an accepting attitude is mostly explained by Miquel d'Esplugues's genius for integration, which brought Catalan Thomists closer to the line of the “open” neo-scholasticism of the Lovaina school headed up by Mercier, and to other European initiatives that were gaining momentum at the start of the century, which instead of “making gestures imposed on them by the opposing initiatives”⁵ found their own path –and their own criteria⁶.

So much so that he made room in the journal's pages for the article we publish here, A Philosopher's Leisure, about the *enfant terrible* who was its author –“deep down a good chap”⁷.

Text edited by Maria Arquer

3 Quoted in A. Galí, *Filosofia a Catalunya 1900-1936*, ed. Pere Lluís Font and Josep Monserrat Molas, p. 90.

4 “La primera revista catalana de filosofia”[“The First Catalan Philosophy Journal”], *Criterion*, 1 (January-June 1925), p. 17.

5 A. Galí, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

6 For more on Miquel d'Esplugues, see the chapter by Antoni Mora, “Les lluites del pare Miquel d'Esplugues. Uns episodis de Filosofia (i) Política” [“The Struggles of Father Miquel d'Esplugues: Episodes in Philosophy (and) Politics”], in P. Casanovas & J. Monserrat (eds.), *Pensament i filosofia a Catalunya. 11: 1924-1939*, Barcelona, Inehca-Societat Catalana de Filosofia, 2003, p. 11-32.

7 Miquel d'Esplugues, “L'oci d'un filòsof”, *Criterion*, V, 16 (1929), p. 76-82.

A Philosopher's Leisure¹

One summer day I unexpectedly met up with the author of this book in the orchard of the convent. He had joined a mutual friend who was coming to see me. And this friend had never bothered to mention that he was an acquaintance of the same man that years ago had promised me a visit and a copy of his first book when it came out.

Once introductions were made, he and I engaged in conversation for half an hour, or even forty-five minutes. It felt like we were old friends. We never saw each other again.

Cristòfor de Domènec would die less than a year later in the Hospice, and since in his final illness he was often visited by Father Baldelló, who already wrote in these pages one of the most cordial and balanced articles that have ever been written about him ², I thought that, under such delicate circumstances, it was better for me to keep my opinion to myself.

I avidly read some facts about his life, very fairly expounded, and was very impressed by them. He had been a millionaire and had ended up almost destitute. He had endured hardship with most exemplary serenity. He was nearing fifty years old and he lived in celibacy, in the service of his beloved mother. Generous to the point of extravagance –this I learned from others–, if he ever had a penny and knew of some friend that was in need, he would happily give what was so badly needed in his own poverty stricken home. (Is it perhaps due to his money problems that most of his work remains unpublished to this day?).

This group of random facts, together with others which I already knew and would now not be able to differentiate, interest me much more than his philosophy.

Even when it is a philosopher, a writer's life tends to be as interesting as his ideas, and quite often more so. Thinking is easy; living is not.

To deal personally with Cristòfor de Domènec, to see his actions and hear his words, to research his past and to read in the dying flame of his eyes, to glance leisurely at those pocked charcoal slabs that were his teeth, sentinels of a face as picturesquely tanned as a red Indian's –what a delightful subject of study.

1 In reference to the book recently published with this title [Cristòfor de Domènec, *L'oci d'un filòsof*,] Barcelona, J. Horta, 1928.

2 F. Baldelló, "Semblança de Cristòfor de Domènec" ["A Portrait of Cristòfor de Domènec"], *Criterion*, III, 11, p. 497-500.

But curiosity soon moved to the background. A strange emotion, between fondness and sympathy, inexorably took center stage.

Unwillingly, and recalling Cánovas del Castillo's famous paradox –“an idiot spoiled by learning”–, I tended to sum up Cristòfor de Domènec's personality more or less like this: “A big heart, almost heroic, wrecked by a tragic life; an above-average intelligence that had perhaps been ruined by reading”.

And maybe by other little excesses too. Little in and of themselves, like smoking, coffee and such, but big because he abused them. Because, as they say, “many little bits end up making a lot”.



When we parted, I was pleased to have met such a naturally Christian soul, in spite of his obsession against Christ; yet devastated by the fact that his case was lost, both physically and spiritually; a little spooked, not by his lack of religion, but by his *liveliness*, since it was useless, and even cruel, to contradict him, and regardless of how much I humored him, by the next day all of Barcelona could know what we had been talking about... or what we had not been talking about. Also, needless to say, I had to keep my distance between his Satanist philosophy and such a Christian ideology as mine.

The aftermath of his death is too recent to dredge up already. I don't know what surprises will emerge from the announced publication of his numerous manuscripts. In any case, *A Philosopher's Leisure* comes as the first disappointment. Or the second one, if we think that the *Leisure* and the *Diary of a Heterodox Thinker* are as alike as two peas in a pod... and both equally devoid of philosophy.

I'm not in favor with smugly denying anyone the title of philosopher, as if it were membership in the Golden Fleece Order, or the French Legion of Honor. Generally speaking, those who argue that philosophy is an exclusive club are just trying to hoard the title of philosophers for themselves.

In the long term this is in detriment of philosophy. To turn it into a caste is to impoverish it. And also to discredit it, because to those outside it looks like “philosophers are unable to understand each other”.

In *The City of God*, Saint Augustine referred to this very old vice in his impressive argument against the theodicy of paganism. The same thing could be said of all other branches of philosophy³.

3 “C'est ainsi qu'avec les mille dieux de la Fable on aboutissait à un Dieu unique. Ce travail s'accomplit avec une habilité, une souplesse, une fécondité de ressources merveilleuses; par

Let us say that everyone endowed with a transcendental curiosity that is persistent and cannot be uprooted, is a philosopher. To me, Aquinas was already a philosopher at six years old, almost as much as he was at fifty. Saint Augustine was one all his life, more than anybody else. There is no reason, therefore, to deny Cristòfor de Domènec that honor, since he was a man full of abundant and enduring transcendental curiosity.

What we can doubt is his personality as a writer of philosophy, and especially his originality. Being original in your ideas is not the same thing as being famous for your *boutades*.

The very flaw of calling himself a philosopher strikes me as a bad start. And this collection of little jokes does not contribute to making him a philosopher, either orthodox or heterodox, which in this case doesn't really matter.

The only things that abound in his stories are sacrilege, paradox, sexual obsession, and, now and then, eroticism. But none of these specialties has much to do with philosophy.

Setting aside the enormous influence of a series of poorly digested readings, I am inclined to see all these tendencies –and the whole of his work– as an acute reaction to the author's infantilism and as the revelations of a semi-tragic subconscious.

Erotic obsessions are a reaction to his almost heroic bachelorhood, with maybe a little of manly impotence added to the mix. There is not a bit of anthropology here. Also, the illness that ended his life is a typical consequence of such reactions.

And the sacrilegious *boutades* reveal his profound religiousness, although inverted, which is further proof of his naïveté: “*Le satanisme littéraire, n'est souvent qu'une fleur de l'ingénuité*”. These are not the words of a friar, but of a modern professor and famous medical critic⁴.

This is why I took such a liking to him, and why I pitied him almost more than I liked him. I trust that neither God nor man will reproach me

malheur, chacun le fit à sa manière. Il n'y en eut aucun, parmi ces sages, dont l'autorité s'imposât aux autres. Au contraire, comme ils étaient ingénieux et subtils de nature, et qu'ils aimaient à le faire voir, tous tinrent à se séparer de leurs prédécesseurs et à donner des solutions nouvelles. Puis vint un lourd Romain, un compilateur consciencieux, le docte Varron, qui tint à rassembler toutes ces opinions différentes et ne fit grâce d'aucune. En les réunissant, il en fit mieux ressortir la diversité et fournit à saint Augustin la preuve évidente que ce grand effort des théologiens du paganisme n'avait réussi qu'à montrer plus clairement qu'il leur était impossible de s'entendre” (Boissier, *La fin du paganisme*, p. 325).

4 Voivenel, *La chasteté perverse*, Paris, s 1928.

for this. It only took a bit of human understanding, not to mention Christian piety.

Christianity, on the other hand, has always been synonymous with magnanimity. And Catholicism has always meant openness. Even more so in countries like ours where all Christianity is Catholicism, through the millennia.

Cristòfor de Domènec suffered as much from intellectual illness as from tuberculosis. If we actually consider it from the vantage points of faith and philosophy, and therefore from a purely rational but unbiased perspective, what is Satanism, but a malady of the psyche?

Traditionally, corporal possessions have been regarded as maladies. Jesus himself considered them worthy of applying his thaumaturgic powers. But are mental obsessions any less of a spiritual malady?

It doesn't take a genius to see clearly, through his appearance and particularly through his obsessions, that Cristòfor de Domènec, for whatever reason, had lost the mental ability to perceive the sublime realities of Christianity. Hence the fact that those two emotions –fondness and pity– were so inextricably entangled within me.

I think that people are insufficiently aware of the fact that reason itself is as delicate as a transistor radio or a camera –you can only obtain certain results under certain conditions.

Therefore, if concepts are to be revealed through the camera –alive, subtle and full of charms– that is our power of perception, then it is obvious that results will be subject to the innumerable flaws of our lens.

Sexual anomalies, sentimental crises, organic irregularities, either natural or induced, an unpleasant impression, a slight fever, the stress and the problems of everyday life, nervous exhaustion, the natural hotness of young blood, the thinning of thickening of said blood due to old age, rushing or agitation –all of these things often challenge the integrity of our perceptions, even our physical perceptions, not to mention the intellectual ones.

I wish Catholic thinkers, mere borrowers of a gift that doesn't belong to us, were much more lenient towards those who suffer spiritual maladies, just like Christ is lenient with them in the Gospels!

Because Christian faith is not some sort nobility that we should be flaunt as we wander through landscapes of egotism thinly disguised as religion; it comes directly from our Father that is in Heaven, and it should make us merciful, as He is merciful, and, like His only son, “mild and humble”. “I want mercy instead of sacrifice, since I have not come to call the just to repent, but the sinners” (Matthew, 12:7).

This is our strength, and also the proof that Christ helps us move far above the enemy –his and ours–, who is generally not openly in opposition, but simply ignorant.

While showing him a load of ammunition, Baron d'Hermance, commander of the armies at Allinges, told Saint Francis de Sales, a missionary among the heretics of Switzerland, the following words: "Everything that you see is under your command. Just say the word. We have everything that is needed to either *convert* those heretics or punish them". "These war machines are not necessary for the word of God to prevail", replied the Apostle, who later became the patron saint of Catholic journalism (Bull of Canonization XV).

Let's leave for the adversary, then, the *gross* artillery of gruesomeness and blasphemy, which are so often uttered just to see what effect they will have on our ranks, alas!, and to trigger the defenses of the Gospels, which do not always display the malignancy that they preach.

In any case we are obliged to set an example, not only a religious example, but also a civil and patriotic one, by not responding in the same tone, when religion is grossly attacked.

Finally, I find it really difficult to be fair to Cristòfor de Domènec without taking into consideration the following observation made by the aforementioned professor and Medical critic:: "*C'est Nietzsche, nerveux et faible, chantant la puissance. C'est le timide Stendhal, peignant en fer Julien Sorel. C'est Pierre Louys, délicat de poitrine et chaste, se complaisant dans son erotisme enchanteur. C'est Kleist et ses 'visions'. C'est Octave Feuillet, dont Henry Bordeaux, dans son livre récent nous apprend que cet apparent 'mondain' fut en réalité un hypocondriaque renforcé. C'est Verhaeren, si doux, qui fulmine dès qu'il écrit; c'est Hérédia dont les sonnets, impassibles, camouflent une sensibilité très profonde..., c'est..., etc.*" (p. 239).

I think this points in a good direction. Unfortunately, it's not a very usual direction among us, with a few exceptions, since we are too naively prone to either exaggerate praise or fierce attack. In other words, criticism without nuances or subtleties, displaying a sad lack of insight for discovering what is happening deep inside the authors' minds.

In this case, I'm talking about the ill-fated *gentiluomo* that lay beneath Cristòfor de Domènec's naïve Satanism, under his sick eroticism, under all that bad and ugly stuff that he, reversed hypocrite, enjoyed displaying, with the flirtatiousness of a decent lady who wants to be seen as indecent.

And he was naïve enough to think that he was fooling everyone with the masks, often grotesque, of his impressive tragedy, both private and public.

With the exception of this only aspect, truly moving and positive, we shouldn't therefore give much credit –either from rationalist positions or from a Christian outlook, and much less from the vantage point of pure philosophy– to this man that became, in Catalonia, an *enfant terrible* with his Satanist jokes.

Deep down he was a good chap, even a kid. To show this, I will tell how I first took a liking to him and how our relationship started, not a very deep one, but quite friendly in both directions.

For five or six years, I occasionally received newspaper clippings. I finally found out that they were sent by Cristófor de Doménec.

These clippings contained the basic elements of his lack of religion, either quoted from conferences or published in articles.

He must have delighted himself in imagining my horror at finding those atrocities in my mailbox. But I was only sorry that I didn't have him with me to give him a good slap.

I want to believe that our Father in Heaven has not been more severe with that big hearted man, His son, illuminated –and led astray– by a complex, short-sighted intelligence.⁵

Translation from Catalan by Mara Lethem

5 However, after these pages were prepared about two months ago, we read in the local press : “The posthumous book by Cristòfor de Domènec, *L'oci d'un filòsof* has been taken out of bookstores. *L'oci d'un filòsof* has been denounced to the public prosecutor for alleged slander of the Catholic religion and morality”.